

Places in Rome

The Basilica of *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme*

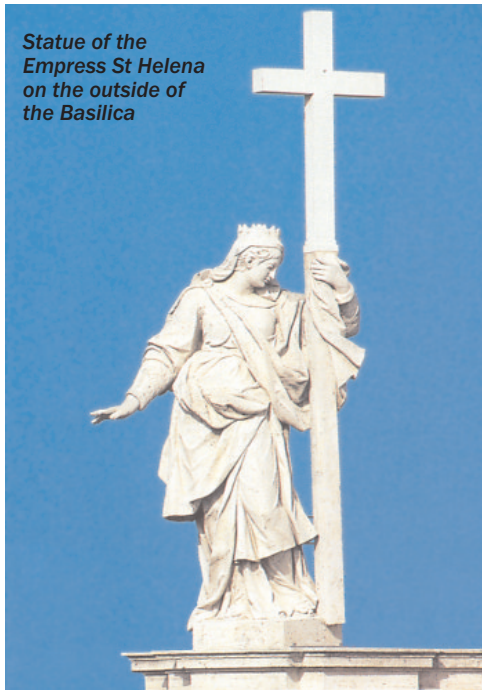
Among the Jews it was not permitted to bury executed criminals in the common cemetery, and this was one reason why the Body of Jesus was taken to a private tomb, given by Joseph of Arimathea (cf. Matt 27:60). Instruments of torture and tools used by executioners were also considered unclean, and so these were also buried or thrown into some crack in the ground, to be out of people's way.

No less shameful than those instruments, in the eyes of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, was the hill of Golgotha itself, where Jesus was crucified, and this can be seen from the Latin rendering of the name, *Locus Calvariae*, the place of the skull. After our Lord's Resurrection, it must have produced general surprise in the city to see the Christians going so often to that desolate spot, to kneel on the earth that had been bathed in the Blood of Christ and pray at the hole where the Cross had stood. They also went to kiss the rock tomb where his dead Body had rested.

Very possibly this custom had to be interrupted at certain periods because of the persecutions and other events such as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. However, it must have persisted into the second century, because the Emperor Hadrian (117-138) had the dip in the ground that separated Golgotha from the Sepulcher filled in, and on this new platform had two temples



built, one dedicated to Juno over the Sepulcher, and the other to Venus, on the summit of Golgotha. Hadrian is known to have felt great animosity towards Christianity at the end of his life, and it is almost certain that these temples were built especially to destroy for ever the earthly traces of the Redemption.



Statue of the
Empress St Helena
on the outside of
the Basilica

Early Church historians commented ironically on the paradoxical results of the pagans' efforts with the passage of time. "Poor men!" exclaimed Eusebius of Caesarea. "They thought it was possible to hide from the human race the splendor of the sun that had risen over the world! They did not yet understand that it is impossible to keep hidden under earth Him who has won the victory over death!"¹ Indeed, by the fourth century, when the Church finally enjoyed freedom, these two pagan temples enabled the Holy Places to be located unflinching. All that had to be done was demolish the temples and excavate underneath, and the Holy Sepulcher and the summit of Calvary were revealed

1. Eusebius of Caesarea, *De vita Constantini*, 3, 16.



The "Invention" (finding) of the Holy Cross

The driving force behind the rediscovery of the places of our Lord's Passion was the Empress St Helena, who traveled to the Holy Land in 326. She was the mother of the Emperor Constantine and was already advanced in years - she must have been around 80 by that time. But she did not want to die without having prayed in the land where the Lord had lived, died and risen.

We have little information about St Helena's early life. She was probably a native of Bithynia, and of humble origin. St Ambrose says that she was a *stabularia* - possibly meaning a servant at an inn - before her marriage to Constantius Chlorus in the year 273. Their son Constantine was born the following year. Constantius was an ambitious officer in the Roman army, who achieved the rank of joint Emperor in 293.

That same year he repudiated his wife, who was not of noble blood, and Helena remained under a cloud until her son Constantine bestowed the title of Empress on her in 306. By that time Helena was already a Christian, and she used her privileged position to do good, practicing charity towards the poor, and enriching divine worship by all the means in her power. So outstanding were her faith and piety that St Ambrose did not hesitate to sing her praises, calling her a "Great woman, who gave to the Emperor much more than you received from him."²

On her journey to the Holy Land she was responsible for the building of the first basilicas, that of the Nativity in Bethlehem and of the Ascension on Mount Olivet. As for Golgotha, when St Helena arrived in Jerusalem the pagan temples had just been demolished, so that the Empress was able to fulfill her dream of kneeling on the ground where our Savior had been raised on the Cross, and praying at the rock of the Holy Sepulcher. However, she realized at once

2. St Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii*, n. 41.

that the most important relics of all had not yet been found.

St Ambrose gives us a vivid description of her walking among the ruins of the Roman temples accompanied by soldiers and workmen, and asking herself, "Here is the battleground, but where is the victor's trophy? Do I sit on a throne, while the Cross of the Lord is buried in the dust? Am I surrounded by gold, and the triumph of Christ by rubble? (...) I see that you have done everything possible, O devil, to bury the sword by which you were brought to naught."³

The new excavations ordered by the Empress bore fruit when three crosses were found in the ground near Golgotha, as well as the tablet on which was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin "Jesus

3. St Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii*, nn. 43-44.



Reliquary with the Titulus Crucis, the part of the tablet from the Cross. It was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, but in each case from right to left



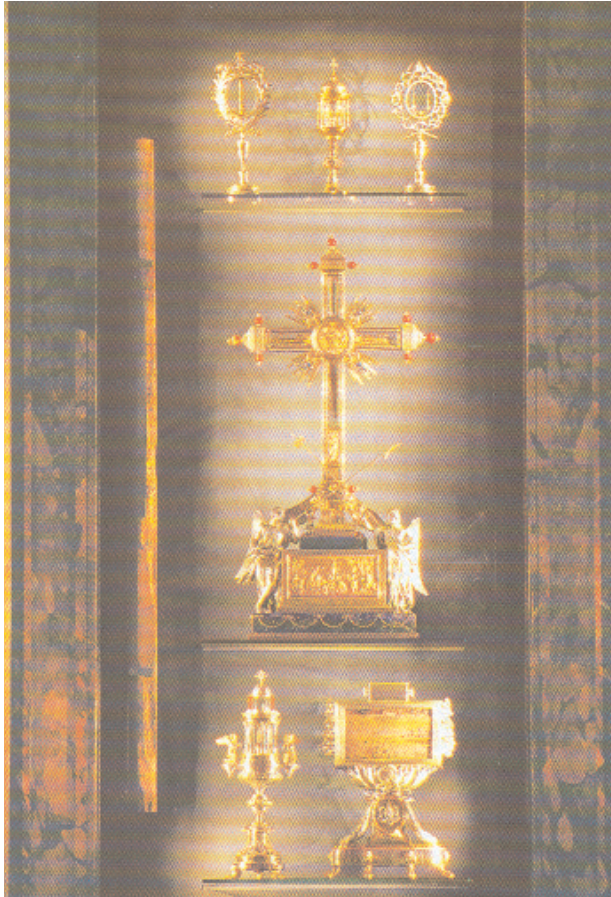
of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (usually represented by the initials of the Latin words, INRI). This was the "invention" or finding (from the Latin *invenire*, to find) of the Holy Cross of our Lord, which had been hidden for three centuries. The holy Empress left most of the relics in Jerusalem, but she took back with her to Rome three fragments of the True Cross, the tablet with the inscriptions, one of the nails, and some thorns from the crown that the executioners had placed on Jesus' head. She also had a large amount of earth from Golgotha brought to Rome, and the stone steps from the stairway that our Lord had trodden four times on the day of his Passion, when he was tried before Pilate in the Praetorium.

The Sessorian Basilica, or "Sancta Hierusalem"

There are many documents dating from the third and fourth centuries that describe how, after St Helena's visit, the Christians venerated the relics that had been left in Jerusalem. This is attested by Eusebius, Rufinus, Theodoret, and St Cyril of Jerusalem. Egeria (or Aetheria), a woman who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Places in the fourth century, spoke of great crowds of the faithful who, even then, gathered from all the Christian East to take part in the solemn celebrations in honor of the Cross.

In the mid-fifth century another historian, Socrates Scholasticus, recorded a pious tradition by which during the Empress's sea-crossing on her journey back to Rome, there was a violent storm. The ship was at the point of sinking, when St Helena tied the Holy Nail she carried with her to a rope and threw it overboard. As soon as it touched the waves, the sea instantly grew calm.

This Nail, the three fragments of the Cross and the INRI tablet were kept devoutly by St Helena in her imperial palace, the *Palatium Sessorianum*. Some years later, possibly after his mother's death, Constantine had a basilica built there which took



The relics of the Passion that are preserved in the Basilica. Above, a finger of the Apostle St Thomas, some fragments of the rock of the Holy Sepulcher, and two thorns from the Crown. Center, the reliquary with the Lignum Crucis or fragment of the True Cross. Below, one of the Nails and the Titulus Crucis. Left, set vertically, a large piece of the Good Thief's cross



its name from the palace and was known as the Sessorian Basilica, and also *Sancta Hierusalem* - Holy Jerusalem. The earth from Golgotha that the Empress Helena had brought from Golgotha was laid down as the symbolic foundation of the building, and the precious fragments of the Holy Cross were displayed for the veneration of the faithful in a reliquary of gold adorned with jewels.

Of this first basilica built by Constantine only a few pieces of the outer walls now remain. Another was built in the twelfth century, and this was replaced in its turn by a late Baroque building, completed in 1744, which still stands today. Despite these architectural changes, and other events such as the Barbarian invasions of Rome, a large number of documents testify that the relics now venerated in the basilica are the very same as those brought by St Helena from the Holy Land.

The basilica naturally became the object of devotional visits by the Christian people, and very soon the Good Friday liturgy began to be celebrated there. Until the fourteenth century the Pope in person walked barefoot at the head of the procession from the Lateran Basilica to the Basilica of Santa Croce, to adore the *vexilla Regis*, the banner of the King and flag of our salvation.

August 4, 1946

St Josemaría went to pray in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme on August 4, 1946. He had been in Rome less than two months, since June 23. Since arriving in the Holy City he had worked intensely, amid the fierce summer heat and in spite of the problems caused by his diabetes, to prepare the documents that had to be presented to the Holy See to obtain the *Decretum Laudis*, or "Decree of Praise", for Opus Dei. This would mean the approval of the Work as an institution of pontifical rite, endowed with universal regulations. St Josemaría urgently wished for this approval as it would facilitate Opus Dei's apostolic expansion, and



he put every effort into completing the work in the shortest possible time.

On August 4, at a quarter to five in the afternoon, the Cardinal Prefect of the competent dicastery had a meeting with Don Alvaro del Portillo to discuss the dates when the documents could be presented. This was when the Founder of Opus Dei decided to spend that Sunday afternoon praying in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, while Don Alvaro was with the Cardinal.

It is easy to guess what St Josemaría's prayer that afternoon must have been like: a prayer of confident, faith-filled petition, together with the utmost acceptance of God's Will. There, before the relics of the Passion, he must have thought once again how "finding the Cross of Jesus Christ on our path assures us that we are following in his footsteps."⁴

4. St Josemaría Escrivá, *Letter 14 February 1944*, 19.



Reliquary with the Nail. Below, thorns from the Crown.



The *Decretum Laudis* was finally granted by the Holy See more than six months later, on February 24, 1947. Although this delay made St Josemaría suffer, he accepted it without losing his peace of mind, as an opportunity to embrace the Cross. And he passed on that attitude to his children.

"We must always be peaceful and positive about setbacks if they occur, about what people call failures. Success or failure is in the interior life. Success consists of receiving Jesus Christ's Cross serenely, opening our arms wide to it, because for Jesus and for us, the Cross is a throne, it is the exaltation of love. It is the summit of redeeming effectiveness to bring souls to God, in our own mode as lay-people: with our conversation, our friendship, our work, our words, our doctrine, our prayer and mortification."⁵

5. St Josemaría Escrivá, *Letter 31 May 1954*, 30.